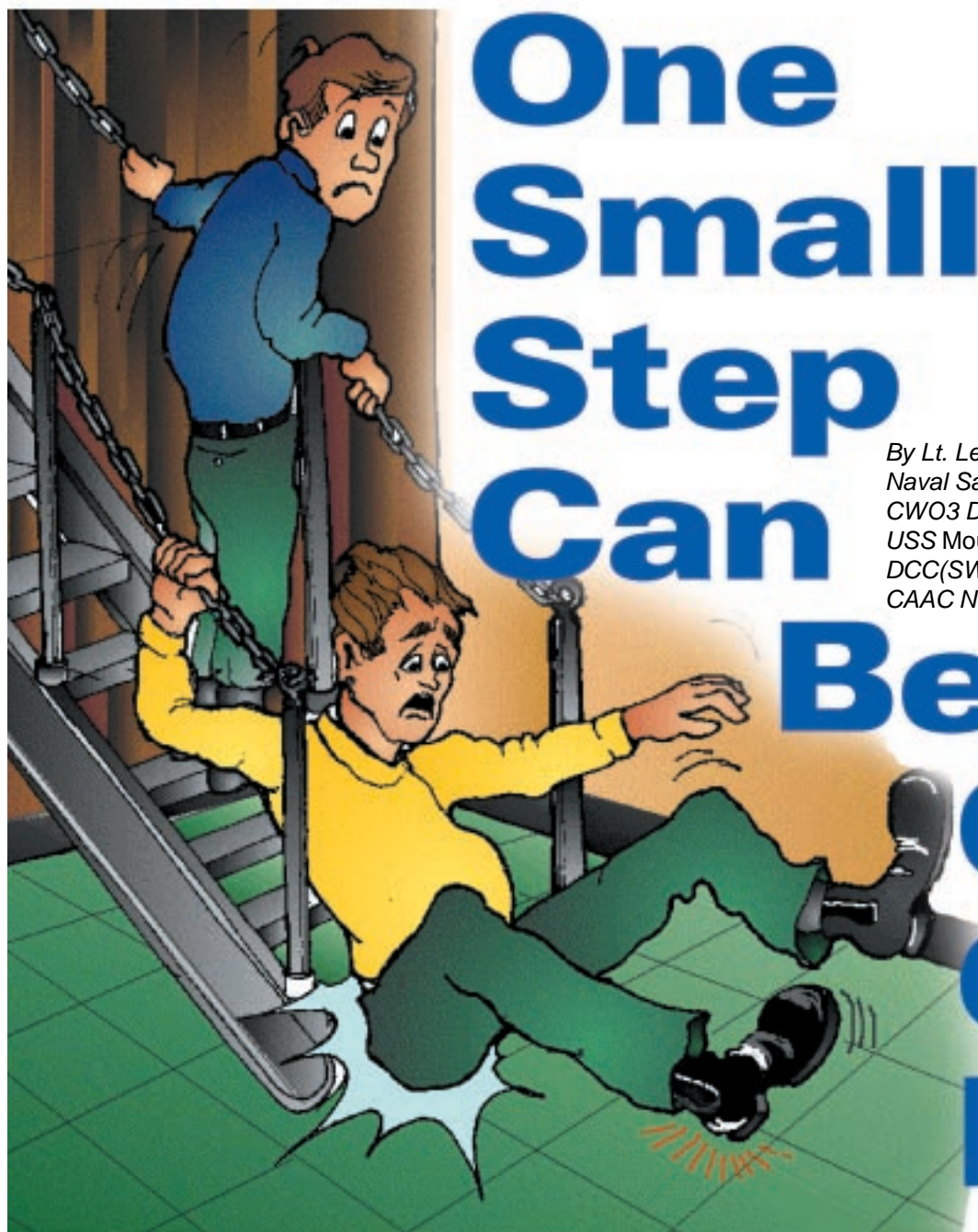




Rudder Amidships



One Small Step Can Be

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One Giant Pain

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While going down a ladder, a Sailor catches his heel, falls and lands at the bottom of the ladderwell. He crawls through an Ellison door and uses a 2JV-phone circuit to call for help. A compressed vertebra causes him to miss 30 workdays.

On a different ship, another Sailor suffers a similar back injury. He falls to the bottom of the stairwell, but, unlike the first Sailor, can't crawl and get help. He lies on the deck until shipmates find him and call medical.

While carrying a stack of boxes so high he can't see the ladder he's using, a Sailor slips and falls. Shipmates hear his cries of pain and help him to medical, where a doctor assigns light duty for a strained lower back.

As these examples show, it doesn't pay to take ladders for granted. Otherwise, you can end up being a statistic. During calendar year 1999, we received 51 afloat-mishap reports involving ladders. Those mishaps resulted in 731 lost workdays.

How do we stop these injuries? The only foolproof plan would be to forbid Sailors from using ladders. Another idea would be to adopt the plan in effect aboard newer Military Sealift Command ships. These ships have been equipped with wider stairways and commercial-type elevators, thus reducing the number of ladders required.

Given today's budget squeeze, however, the solution we have to live with is to make the present ladders as safe as possible. Here are some things we can do to keep them in top material condition:

- Replace worn and mismatched steps, as well as missing non-skid strips.
- Keep ladder steps and landings dry.
- Tighten any loose ladders, handrails and steps; replace those that are broken.
- Replace missing toggle pins from ladders or stanchions.
- Replace missing or disconnected safety chains around the hatches leading to ladders.

The top three problems we find during safety surveys are worn or loose treads, worn or loose non-skid strips, and missing safety chains around hatches.

We also have to train shipmates how to use ladders. The first rule is to keep both hands on ladder handrails when possible. If one hand is full, use the other to grasp the handrail. When moving heavy objects up or down ladders, always use two people. Slow down and watch your step. Never use handrails as slides. When moving stores, consider using ladder slides, conveyors, and rigging equipment. Also consider rotating personnel. Don't wear shower shoes on ladders. Don't take running leaps onto ladders.

During rough weather, ladders become even more dangerous. The safest way to descend a ladder in those conditions is to back down. This method, which is more stable, lets the ball of your foot, rather than a small part of your heel, touch the steps.

Drinking too much alcohol also contributes to ladder injuries. A Sailor having a hard time walking on a flat deck is going to be in big trouble trying to descend four ladders to reach the berthing compartment. If you wouldn't let your shipmates drive while drunk, don't let them wander around the ship drunk. Do them a favor and help them find their berthing spaces.

Don't take ladders for granted, even if you've gone down the same one 3,000 times. In one case, a Sailor fell two decks when he started down a *familiar* ladder. Shipmates had removed it for painting.

What else can we do to solve this problem? Find ways to manage and minimize the potential risk. We recommend these specific steps:

- Include ladder-safety tips during ship indoctrination and safety stand-downs. Publish periodic safety notes.
 - Run frequent notes in the Plan of the Day, and post it on the safety bulletin board. A typical note might read: **"Word of the day—ladders. What goes up must come down, but don't come down too hard. Use handrails while climbing ladders to ensure a safe passage."**
 - When you see people using ladders the wrong way, stop them and tell them the right way.
- Ladders always will be a dangerous part of shipboard life. Don't let them trip you up. ☺

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